



CAN CORONA CURE OUR SUPERIORITY COMPLEX?



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (9 November 2020)

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A superiority complex is hard to cure. Nobody in Europe is longing for a return to empire (well, nobody in continental Europe, at least). Most Americans still pretend they never even had an empire. But Europeans and Americans still feel that we are entitled to dominate international politics, and that it is perfectly natural that the EU and the US are the most wealthy places on earth. Deep down, we feel that we have merited this, through our hard work – the implication being that if other people are less well off, they have merited that also. The reality is, of course, that we created the international order to our economic benefit. If the US dollar is the reserve currency of the world, and if the World Bank is always headed by an American and the International Monetary Fund by a European, that is not a law of nature, but the result of a far-sighted strategy that the US and its European allies implemented at the end of the Second World War.

Obviously, nobody outside the EU and the US thinks that we have a right to permanent pre-eminence. Europe and America already lost a lot of their feathers by their failure to prevent, and then to resolutely manage, the 2008 financial crisis. It was our own failure that left a vacuum that China keenly filled; we enabled Beijing's final breakthrough. China sensed the opportunity to put its by then enormous resources to use to achieve a massive gain of influence, and firmly established itself as a great power at the same level as the US and the EU.

Today, the corona crisis has definitely washed off the last gloss from Europe's and America's reputations. We don't realise what a damage loss of credit (by the way, we suffered in the other parts of the world, not least in Asia. It was already difficult to understand for people in Asia why our supposedly well organised states, with their comprehensive health care systems,

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reacted so late to the outbreak in China. But then our lack of experience with the SARS virus, which hit Asia hard in 2003, could serve as an excuse. Although that too pointed to our superiority complex: did we not see COVID-19 as just another “alien” virus that would pass us by? It might hit China, but certainly not us – until it did. What is really incomprehensible in Asia, however, is that the EU and the US now allow themselves to be swamped again by the second wave of the pandemic. Suddenly it seems as if the coronavirus has become “the white man’s burden”... After this gigantic failure on the part of the richest and strongest states in the world, it will be very difficult to go around the globe finger-wagging, pretending that we know better than others how to run things.

Don't Repeat Our Mistakes

If the pandemic can permanently cure the West of its superiority complex, it will at least have had one positive side-effect. In its 2016 Global Strategy, the EU listed a rules-based international order as one of its vital interests. Those rules can no longer simply be imposed by the West upon the others. That does not mean we have to abandon our strategic agenda. But we will have to actively convince other states of the validity of what we see as the core rules: don't make war, don't fence off exclusive spheres of interest, respect human rights, and abide by the rules that you want others to follow. We will have to negotiate with other states on an even footing, and be willing to share power in order to create a rules-based order that all states buy into. That requires that we formulate a positive project for the international order. “We are not China” is not sufficient; we must announce which global public goods we seek to create for the benefit of all.

Unfortunately, many authoritarian regimes present the failure of the west as a failure of democracy, and thus undermine the credibility of our view of the core rules. One only needs to look at democratic Taiwan, which probably dealt with the coronavirus better than anybody else, to know that the issue is not democracy. Without resolute leadership and a strong state apparatus, democratic, populist, and dictatorial regimes all fail. But the corona crisis does represent a failure of the sense of the collective in the West. The US demonstrates that patriotism and even nationalism can go hand in hand with the absence of collective responsibility. Many ardent patriots see the US of A as a collection of individuals who fend for themselves rather than as a community of citizens who look out for each other through strong institutions. In the EU, vice versa, strong welfare states embody the sense of collective responsibility, but they are the victim of their own success. Many people no longer feel that they have a personal responsibility to assume. This is probably why Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan perform so much better in controlling the outbreak than we.

Nevertheless, there is one point in the West, perhaps its only one, where the superiority complex only for others to assume one, notably China. US officials these days don't talk of China anymore; they all speak of the Chinese Communist Party. Obviously, the CCP has all the power in a one-party

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state, but if the US applied this principle consistently, it should also talk about the House of Al-Saud rather than Saudi Arabia. More importantly, this rhetorical trope misses the main challenge, which is Chinese nationalism. CCP propaganda has been very effective, not in promoting communism, but in creating nationalism. Patriotism is a force for good, and the Chinese people can be justifiably proud of many of China's economic achievements. Nationalism, however, is a negative force, and if it is not kept under control it risks putting China on a course that can only antagonise other states, to the detriment of China's interests.

Instead, a global pandemic calls for global cooperation. World leaders missed the first opportunity: when the outbreak first hit, many instrumentalised it to pursue their rivalry with other powers. But we have a second chance: if and when a vaccine becomes available, it must not become an instrument of competition, but a reason to cooperate and ensure its availability to all. Let us prove ourselves superior to our baser urges.

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